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## DISCUSSION AND CORRESPONDENCE

### ORAL TRADITION AND HISTORY

THE symposium articles in recent issues of the *American Anthropologist* and the *Journal of American Folk-Lore* were designed to give foreign attendants at the Nineteenth Session of the Americanist Congress a summary of the work that has been accomplished in North America and a convenient introduction to the points of view held on this side of the Atlantic. This was especially desirable since American scholars have as a rule eschewed a presentation of general results and have often buried important theoretical results amidst a mass of concrete field data. The very fact that the papers in question represent the first synthetic attempt on a large scale harbors, however, a serious danger. It is possible and even probable that our foreign colleagues will view the articles more seriously than do the authors and will mistake individual judgments for the consensus of American opinion.

As one of the collaborators I am especially eager to remove the atmosphere of finality that bids fair to invest the symposium. So far as my own contribution is concerned, I must confess that my views as to the end of ceremonialism are by no means shared by other ethnologists. Conversations with a number of fellow-workers have convinced me that my conception of ceremonialism is generally considered distinctly, nay hopelessly, one-sided. Indeed only in a single quarter have I encountered whole-hearted sympathy with my position. I earnestly desire that this criticism shall be made publicly and that it may inaugurate a thoroughgoing discussion of the subject. In the hope of stimulating an exchange of opinions on all of the topics dealt with I present the following remarks on one of the essays.

In their paper on "Primitive American History" (*American Anthropologist*, 1914, pp. 376-412) Drs Swanton and Dixon start from the sound position that an objective classification has historical significance, and since the only available classification is based on language they take their point of departure from the accepted linguistic grouping. In the further discussion of the history of tribal divisions of these larger stocks they attach great importance to native traditions. It therefore seems unfortunate that they have avoided a discussion of the relations of oral tradition to history. The preliminary statement, that traditions "al-

though sometimes noncommittal and frequently misleading, gain in weight when recorded by several different persons and when taken in connection with other data," hardly supplies this deficiency since in practice the authors repeatedly use the native statements of origin and migration when other data in the shape of ethnological, linguistic, or archeological information are not available or are at least not cited. We require therefore some light on the question whether tradition as such supplies historically valuable data.

The important thing to keep in mind is that the question before us is not a metaphysical one, but a question of method. We are not concerned with the abstract possibility of tradition preserving a knowledge of events; we want to know what historical conclusions may safely be drawn from given oral traditions in ethnological practice. And as regards this purely methodological question I can only say, in substantial agreement with views expressed by Dr P. E. Goddard and more recently by Dr Sidney Hartland ("On the Evidential Value of the Historical Traditions of the Baganda and Bushongo," *Folk-Lore*, xxv, 1914, pp. 428-456), that I cannot attach to oral traditions any historical value whatsoever under any conditions whatsoever. We cannot know them to be true except on the basis of extraneous evidence, and in that case they are superfluous since the linguistic, ethnological, or archeological data suffice to establish the conclusions in question. When linguistic comparison has proved the close affinity of Crow and Hidatsa, the tradition of a common origin shared by the tribes speaking these languages does not lend to the result one iota of additional certainty. Where "other data" are lacking, the use of the oral traditions for historical reconstruction must be discountenanced as a matter of obvious methodological caution. We cannot safely reject as mythical that part of a tradition which conflicts with our conception of physical possibility and retain the remainder as correct. The Nez Percé account of how this people first secured horses (*Journal of American Folk-Lore*, xxI, 1908, p. 158) contains nothing irrational, yet, as Dr Spinden has pointed out, it grossly misrepresents events barely more than a hundred years old. We can hardly do better in testing the historical sense of natives than to select some recent historical event, such as the acquisition of the horse, and note how native memory has preserved or failed to preserve knowledge of it. When we find, for instance, that in an Assiniboine creation myth the hero-trickster makes the earth, regulates the seasons, and creates men and horses in practically a single breath, while the Hopi represent Spider-woman as creating the burro, we may well be skeptical

as to historical reconstructions from native statements. It may be, of course, that tribes differ immensely in point of their historical sense; it may be that they preserve accurately events other than those of interest to us, as indeed seems clear from the calendar counts of Plains tribes. But in the latter case the assumed native "history" is not history in our sense any more than the fact, even if true, of my neighbor's cat having kittens is history; and as for tribal differences, what criteria have we for estimating them solely on the basis of the traditions? From the traditions themselves nothing can be deduced. When different observers record the same account in the same tribe it may simply show that the quasi-historical account is part and parcel of the tribal lore; if it is supported by traditions of other tribes, it may simply point to the diffusion of a myth, a well-known phenomenon in ethnology. The utmost I am able to concede is that a tradition referring to the remote past may furnish a starting-point for linguistic, archeological, or other investigations; but our knowledge of native *history* will in the end depend wholly on the result of these inquiries.

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DR. DIXON'S REPLY

THERE are two points that I should like to raise in connection with Dr Lowie's criticism of the paper recently written by Dr Swanton and myself on "Primitive American History." The objection is made that in the paper we have relied unduly on origin and migration traditions where other data are not available or are not cited, and that there was not included in the paper a discussion of the "relations of oral tradition to history." In the space at our disposal it was quite impossible to give in detail the data on which our conclusions were based or even to cite much of the evidence considered. Wherever possible all evidence, of whatever sort, was taken into account. This same limitation of space made it seem unnecessary to enter into the discussion of the general question of the relative value of oral tradition. The purpose of the article, as we understood it, was to give a summary of the present status of the problem of the history of the Indian tribes of North America; it did not seem any part of our task to indulge in speculations on the philosophy of history or general questions of historical method.

Dr Lowie states emphatically that he does not "attach to oral traditions any historical value whatsoever under any conditions whatsoever." Such a statement is quite amazing, and it hardly seems possible that it was intended to be so extreme. That oral tradition is,